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When Leadership Works Through Culture: A Multilevel Contingency Model of Leader Effectiveness, Norm Alignment, and Adaptive Organizational Performance

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Abstract

Leadership theories frequently treat effectiveness as if leader behavior has stable meaning across organizational settings, yet the same behavior can be interpreted differently under different cultural, structural, and environmental conditions. This conceptual article develops a proposed multilevel contingency model in which leadership effectiveness depends partly on the alignment between enacted leader behavior, culturally embedded norms, and the adaptive demands confronting the organization. The analysis distinguishes organizational culture from climate, separates value congruence from perceptual congruence, and treats alignment as a dynamic cross-level condition rather than a static fit score. The model proposes that alignment can support shared interpretation, trust, coordination, voice, learning, and execution, while misalignment can generate ambiguity, contestation, withdrawal, or productive cultural challenge. Crucially, alignment is not assumed to be uniformly beneficial: strong alignment may stabilize coordination while narrowing search when environmental conditions require experimentation or norm revision. Leader influence is therefore modeled as reciprocal with cultural context, operating through individual, team, and organizational processes and changing over time. The article develops conditional propositions, boundary conditions, and a temporal recalibration logic that can be tested using multilevel longitudinal and stronger causal designs. Its contribution is theoretical rather than empirical: the model integrates established but fragmented premises into a falsifiable architecture while preserving uncertainty about causal direction, timescale, culture strength, organizational maturity, and transferability across sectors and institutional settings.

Keywords: Leadership effectiveness, Organizational culture, Norm alignment, Multilevel theory, Adaptive performance, Cultural fit

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Introduction

Leadership effectiveness is often discussed as though the behavior of a leader can be evaluated independently of the setting in which it is enacted. Yet leadership research has a persistent context deficit: contextual features are frequently treated as controls, background descriptors, or unexplained heterogeneity rather than as theoretically specified conditions that can alter the meaning and consequences of leadership [1]. This matters acutely for organizational culture because culture shapes expectations about legitimate authority, coordination, voice, error, loyalty, and change. A behavior
interpreted as empowering in one normative setting may be experienced as abdication, inconsistency, or status violation in another.

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A second problem concerns evidential status. Much positive leadership-style research relies on designs and measures that make strong causal attribution difficult, especially when leader ratings and follower outcomes are collected through overlapping perceptual channels [2]. The present article therefore does not treat associations between leadership styles and outcomes as proof of a leader-to-performance mechanism. Instead, it uses such evidence selectively to ground constituent premises and marks the combined architecture and propositions as proposed. This discipline is also necessary because leader-centric accounts can overassign explanatory power to focal leaders while underrepresenting followers, collectives, and systems of meaning [3].

The central argument is that leadership effectiveness is partly contingent on leader–culture norm alignment, but that alignment itself is multidimensional, cross-level, and time-varying. The proposed model asks when leader behavior reinforces, reinterprets, or contests prevailing norms; how those encounters shape proximal employee and team processes; when alignment aids coordination yet constrains adaptation; and when misalignment becomes either dysfunctional friction or a source of cultural recalibration. Effectiveness is thus treated as an outcome-contingent relationship among behavior, norms, level, and adaptive demand—not as a stable property of a leader or leadership style.

Why leadership effectiveness cannot be separated from cultural context

Leadership operates inside systems of shared expectations. Integrative work linking ecology, culture, and leadership indicates that leadership preferences, emergence, and effectiveness vary with cultural and ecological conditions, challenging claims that identical leader behaviors carry invariant meaning across settings [4]. The implication is not that culture mechanically determines effectiveness, but that leadership is interpreted through context-specific expectations about authority, reciprocity, coordination, and collective obligation.

Cross-national evidence reinforces this contextual premise. A meta-analysis of leadership and employee engagement found meaningful country differences in the relationship, indicating that a pooled leadership effect can conceal contextual heterogeneity [5]. Country, however, is not a proxy for organizational culture: institutions, labor markets, sectoral arrangements, and measurement equivalence can also generate cross-country variation. Contextual sensitivity therefore requires specifying the mechanism and level rather than attaching national labels to organizational processes.

Evidence on servant leadership similarly suggests that broadly recognizable leader behaviors can possess both relatively general and culturally contingent relevance [6]. This combination is theoretically important. It implies that the relevant question is not whether a behavior is universally effective or wholly culture-bound, but which normative expectations make that behavior legitimate, intelligible, and actionable. The proposed model consequently locates organizational culture between leader behavior and adaptive performance as a contingency system that can amplify, mute, redirect, or sometimes reverse the consequences of leader enactment.

Reconceptualizing organizational culture as a leadership contingency

Treating culture as a leadership contingency first requires construct discipline. Organizational culture and climate have intertwined histories, but they are not interchangeable. Climate centers more directly on shared perceptions of policies, practices, and experienced conditions, whereas culture reaches toward patterned meanings, assumptions, and normative understandings [7]. A model of leader–culture alignment therefore cannot infer culture merely from aggregated attitudes or relabel a climate measure as a cultural one.

Alignment itself also needs disaggregation. Empirical work on "two-sided" cultural fit distinguishes value congruence from perceptual congruence and shows that they can have different behavioral consequences [8]. This distinction suggests two separate questions: whether actors endorse similar values and whether they interpret the organization in similar ways. Cultural breadth and embeddedness add another dimension; employees may be deeply embedded in a local culture while retaining a broader cultural repertoire, with different implications for creativity [9]. Firm-level evidence likewise shows that intrapersonal and interpersonal cultural heterogeneity are not equivalent and can relate differently to performance [10].

These findings undermine a simple "more fit is better" assumption. They also caution against equating cultural strength with uniformity. The article therefore defines proposed norm alignment as the degree to which enacted leader behavior is compatible with, intelligible within, or deliberately able to revise salient organizational norms at a specified level. Alignment is treated as a process rather than a fixed attribute because longitudinal research demonstrates heterogeneous enculturation trajectories over time [11]. Selection, socialization, turnover, and learning can all change the observed relationship between people and cultural context.

Leader behaviors, cultural norms, and cross-level alignment

Leader behavior can become culturally consequential only through processes that connect individual enactment to shared interpretation. Multilevel theory on inclusive leadership illustrates how leader behavior may shape employee experience, group processes, and collective context rather than operating through one direct individual-level path [12]. At the same time,

systematic review evidence shows that inclusive leadership itself is defined and measured heterogeneously, warning against treating a broad style label as a single mechanism [13]. The proposed model therefore focuses on behavior–norm encounters: what the leader does, which norm the behavior reinforces or challenges, and how that encounter is interpreted across levels.

Collective perceptual environments provide one plausible cross-level channel. Multilevel evidence linking diversity climate, trust, and turnover intentions shows that shared contextual cues can be connected to individual trust and withdrawal-related responses [14]. Such evidence does not make climate equivalent to culture, but it supports the broader proposition that collective normative environments shape how employees interpret organizational behavior. At upper levels, research on cultural diversity in top management teams documents competing informational, conflict, and coordination processes rather than a uniform diversity effect [15]. This indicates that alignment and heterogeneity may carry simultaneous benefits and costs.

Table 1 organizes the cross-level diagnostic implied by these distinctions: identical behavior can reinforce, reinterpret, or contest norms, and its expected consequence depends on the level, proximal response, and condition capable of reversing the effect.

Table 1. Diagnosing cross-level leader–culture encounters and their adaptive consequences

Leader behavior or encounter	Cultural norm relation	Level(s) implicated	Alignment or misalignment mechanism	Proximal response	Adaptive-performance implication	Reversal condition
Consistent value-signaling	Reinforces a salient norm	Leader–employee; team	Increases interpretive consistency and legitimacy	Predictability; trust	Faster coordination and execution	Stable agreement narrows search when adaptation requires dissent
Inclusive invitation of voice	Reinterprets status or participation norms	Employee; team	Makes previously weak participation cues more legitimate	Belonging; speaking up	Broader information use and error detection	Behavior is discounted when unit norms or practices contradict the invitation
Behavior inconsistent with prevailing cues	Challenges an established norm	Leader; team	Creates ambiguity about legitimate conduct	Uncertainty; contestation	May expose obsolete assumptions	Friction becomes withdrawal when challenge lacks legitimacy or support
Integration across culturally heterogeneous leaders	Reconciles competing normative repertoires	Top team; organization	Balances information variety with coordination	Debate; synthesis or faultline activation	Broader strategic search	Conflict and subgroup division overwhelm integrative capacity

Note: Entries synthesize the completed argument and are proposed diagnostic categories where the approved evidence does not establish the complete cross-level pathway. Culture, climate, individual fit, and top-management composition remain analytically distinct.

From leader–culture fit to leader–culture misfit

The language of fit can obscure as much as it clarifies unless the content and level of compatibility are specified. Person–environment fit theory distinguishes multiple forms of compatibility, including value, needs–supplies, and demands–abilities relations, and also shows that direct, indirect, objective, and perceived fit measures answer different questions [16]. Accordingly, "leader–culture fit" should not be treated as a single similarity score. A leader may endorse organizational values yet misread how norms are enacted, or may understand prevailing norms while deliberately resisting them.

Misfit should likewise be conceptualized as more than the negative pole of fit. Qualitative research on workplace misfit identifies heterogeneous responses such as resolution, relief, and resignation rather than one uniform deterioration pathway [17]. These employee-level findings do not establish how executives respond to cultural misfit, but they provide a process precedent for treating mismatch as an episode that can trigger different forms of adjustment.

The proposed model extends this logic cautiously. Leader–culture misfit may produce accommodation by the leader, reinterpretation of norms, contestation within teams, selective exit, or attempts at cultural change. Which pathway dominates should depend on power, role security, culture strength, follower support, and external demand. Misfit can therefore be dysfunctional when it destroys legitimacy and coordination, but potentially adaptive when prevailing norms have become maladaptive. This asymmetry is crucial: alignment is valuable only relative to what the organization needs to preserve or change.

A Multilevel contingency model of leadership effectiveness

At the organizational level, leaders are neither passive products of culture nor unconstrained cultural architects. Longitudinal evidence indicates that chief executives can account for meaningful variation in corporate cultural change, supporting leader influence while leaving room for workforce composition, strategy, succession, and external conditions [18]. A reciprocal formulation is therefore more defensible: culture shapes which leader behaviors are legitimate and interpretable, while repeated leader enactment can alter the salience, meaning, or enforcement of norms.

The performance consequence of this relationship is contingent. Formal theory on organizational culture, adaptation, and performance indicates that culture can strengthen coordination yet constrain search under some conditions [19]. Leadership for organizational adaptability similarly emphasizes the need to connect operational coordination with entrepreneurial or emergent processes rather than maximizing one fixed leadership pattern [20]. Together, these premises suggest that leader–culture alignment should not enter the model as an unqualified positive predictor.

The proposed multilevel contingency model therefore links four elements: enacted leader behavior; salient cultural norms; cross-level alignment or misalignment processes; and the adaptive demand facing the organization. Alignment is expected to be useful when it legitimizes behaviors that support the coordination, learning, or search currently required. Misalignment becomes consequential when it disrupts interpretation without generating productive revision, or when it challenges norms that are themselves obstructing adaptation. Effects can move across individual, team, and organizational levels, but no level is inferred from another without an explicit emergence or aggregation process.

Figure 1 visualizes this proposed architecture while keeping reciprocal influence, cross-level pathways, and contextual boundaries visible.

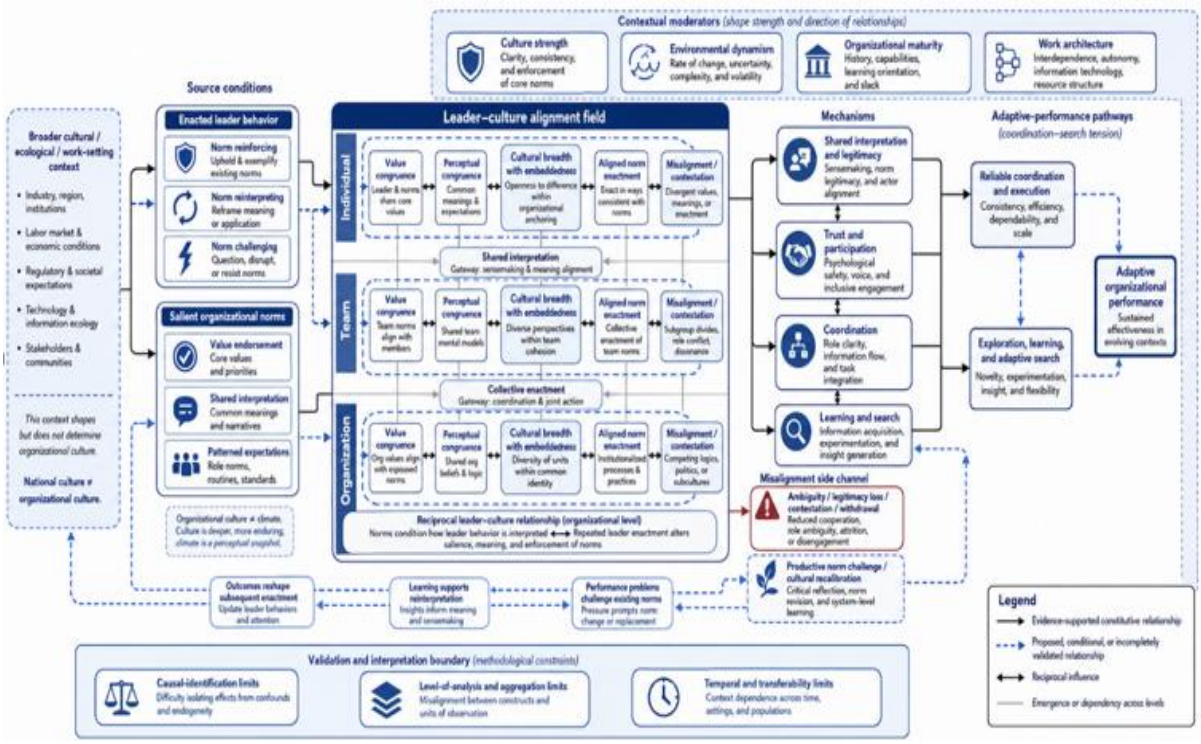

Figure 1. Cultural norm alignment conditions leadership effectiveness across organizational levels

Mechanisms linking norm alignment to adaptive performance

Norm alignment cannot improve adaptation by itself; it must alter processes through which people interpret, coordinate, learn, and act. Evidence on humble leadership illustrates why those mechanisms should be separated across levels. Meta-analytic synthesis connects leader humility with individual, team, and organizational outcomes while also highlighting conceptual differences between behavioral-state and trait interpretations [21]. The implication for the present model is not that humility is universally adaptive, but that behavior may enable learning or relational openness when local norms make such enactment credible.

Construct overlap further cautions against explaining adaptation through leadership-style labels. Meta-analytic evidence shows that ethical, authentic, and servant leadership share substantial variance with transformational leadership [22]. Mechanism-specific theorizing is therefore preferable: what behavior changed autonomy, voice, trust, interpretation, or coordination, and under which norms? Empowering-leadership research provides a useful example because its effects are theorized through autonomy, self-efficacy, meaning, and participation while also depending on followers and task conditions

[23]. Leadership behavior can also affect well-being through affective, cognitive, relational, motivational, and work-design pathways, demonstrating that proximal outcomes should not be collapsed into performance [24].

Across these literatures, the consistent lesson is mechanism plurality rather than one universal pathway [21–23]. The proposed model consequently treats shared interpretation, legitimacy and trust, voice and learning, and coordination as separable mediating channels. Adaptive organizational performance is downstream and conditional: the same alignment that accelerates coordinated execution may reduce dissent or search when existing norms are poorly matched to a changing environment. The theoretical task is therefore to explain when alignment activates the mechanism the organization presently needs—and when effective leadership requires norm challenge rather than norm reinforcement.

Propositions and conditional relationships

For the proposed model to be useful, its relationships must be specified so that they can be challenged rather than merely illustrated. Experimental evidence demonstrates that behaviorally specific leader communication can affect bounded follower and economic outcomes under controlled conditions [25]. This supports formulating propositions around observable behavior rather than broad leadership labels, while leaving the culture-alignment pathway itself to be tested.

Leadership influence also need not remain concentrated in one formal actor. Longitudinal network research indicates that shared leadership configurations can emerge adaptively as team interaction and task requirements change [26]. The model therefore permits norm-aligned influence to become distributed when expertise, interdependence, or environmental demands make collective leadership functional.

Four propositions follow. Proposition 1: leader behavior that is intelligible and legitimate under salient norms should strengthen proximal coordination when those norms support the task demands being faced. Proposition 2: alignment should not have a uniformly positive relationship with adaptive performance; where established norms privilege convergence while adaptation requires search, stronger alignment may reduce exploration, consistent with the coordination–search trade-off identified in culture research [19]. Proposition 3: misalignment should have contingent consequences: unsupported norm violation should weaken legitimacy, whereas credible challenge to maladaptive norms may stimulate reconsideration. Proposition 4: leader–culture influence should be reciprocal over time. Executive behavior can contribute to cultural change [18], while changing leadership networks show that influence configurations themselves can adapt [26].

Table 2 converts these propositions into falsifiable relationships by specifying what observations would support, reverse, or contradict them.

Table 2. Conditional propositions and observations that would challenge the leader–culture contingency model

Proposition	Focal relationship	Expected pattern	Moderator or boundary	Level and horizon	Observable implication	Disconfirmation or reversal
P1 — proposed	Norm-aligned behavior → coordination	Positive when norms fit task demands	Norm relevance; task interdependence	Individual/team; near term	Faster shared interpretation	Alignment does not improve coordination under comparable demands
P2 — proposed	Alignment → adaptive performance	Conditional, not monotonic	Need for search versus convergence	Team/organization; evolving	Coordination gains coexist with reduced exploration in some settings	Alignment improves both search and coordination irrespective of conditions
P3 — proposed	Misalignment → adaptation or breakdown	Direction depends on legitimacy and norm adequacy	Culture strength; support; power	Multiple levels; episodic	Challenge either triggers learning or withdrawal	Misfit has invariant consequences across conditions
P4 — proposed	Leader behavior ↔ culture	Reciprocal change	Tenure; succession; environmental change	Organization; longitudinal	Norms alter behavior reception while repeated enactment alters norms	Influence remains consistently one-directional

Boundary conditions: culture strength, environmental dynamism, and organizational maturity

The value of leader–culture alignment should vary with the stability of the environment and the organization's capacity to revise established routines. Theory on adaptive leadership transitions argues that teams may need to shift leadership enactment as dynamic conditions change and that such transitions can be co-constructed rather than dictated unilaterally by a focal leader [27]. A complementary model of team leadership transitions similarly treats changes in task requirements, expertise, and team needs as conditions under which leadership roles can shift [28]. These arguments make environmental dynamism a central

moderator: behavior that is well aligned with yesterday's coordination norms may become poorly aligned with tomorrow's adaptive demands.

Work architecture provides another boundary. Leadership in virtual settings operates through altered visibility, communication, social cues, and coordination opportunities [29]. Virtuality therefore illustrates why identical behaviors can have different meanings and consequences when interaction structures change. Across dynamic, transitional, and virtual settings, leadership configurations cannot safely be assumed to retain constant effectiveness [27–29].

Culture strength adds a different contingency. Strong consensus may accelerate interpretation and coordinated action but can also make alternative assumptions harder to surface. Organizational maturity should likewise be treated cautiously: it is proposed here as the degree to which routines, roles, and cultural expectations have become institutionalized, not as an established universal scale or developmental sequence. Formal work on organizational adaptation shows why these distinctions matter: organizations face a dual challenge of search and coordination, and structures of influence affect their ability to manage both [30]. The proposed model therefore predicts no universally optimal level of alignment, cultural strength, or leadership stability.

Temporal dynamics and cultural recalibration

A static fit metaphor cannot capture leader–culture relationships that change through hiring, socialization, success, failure, succession, and environmental disruption. A systematic review of temporal person–environment fit research shows that fit is capable of changing as both persons and environments change, while also documenting inconsistent temporal designs and measurement strategies [31]. The implication is methodological as much as theoretical: a single cross-sectional alignment score cannot reveal whether alignment is strengthening, deteriorating, or being actively renegotiated.

Longitudinal enculturation research provides empirical precedent for this dynamic view. Employees can follow different cultural-adaptation trajectories rather than simply entering an organization as permanently fitted or misfitted [11]. At the organizational level, chief executives can contribute to cultural change [18]. At the team level, leadership transitions may be co-constructed in response to changing conditions [27]. These findings support the constituent possibility of change, but they do not establish one common timescale or a deterministic sequence linking leaders and culture.

The article therefore proposes cultural recalibration as a recursive process in which outcomes feed back into interpretations of leader behavior and the adequacy of prevailing norms. Successful coordination may reinforce alignment; recurring failures may weaken norm legitimacy; environmental shocks may make previously functional norms questionable; and leadership succession may alter which behaviors are legitimate. **Figure 2** depicts this process as feedback among analytically separate levels rather than as a fixed cycle.

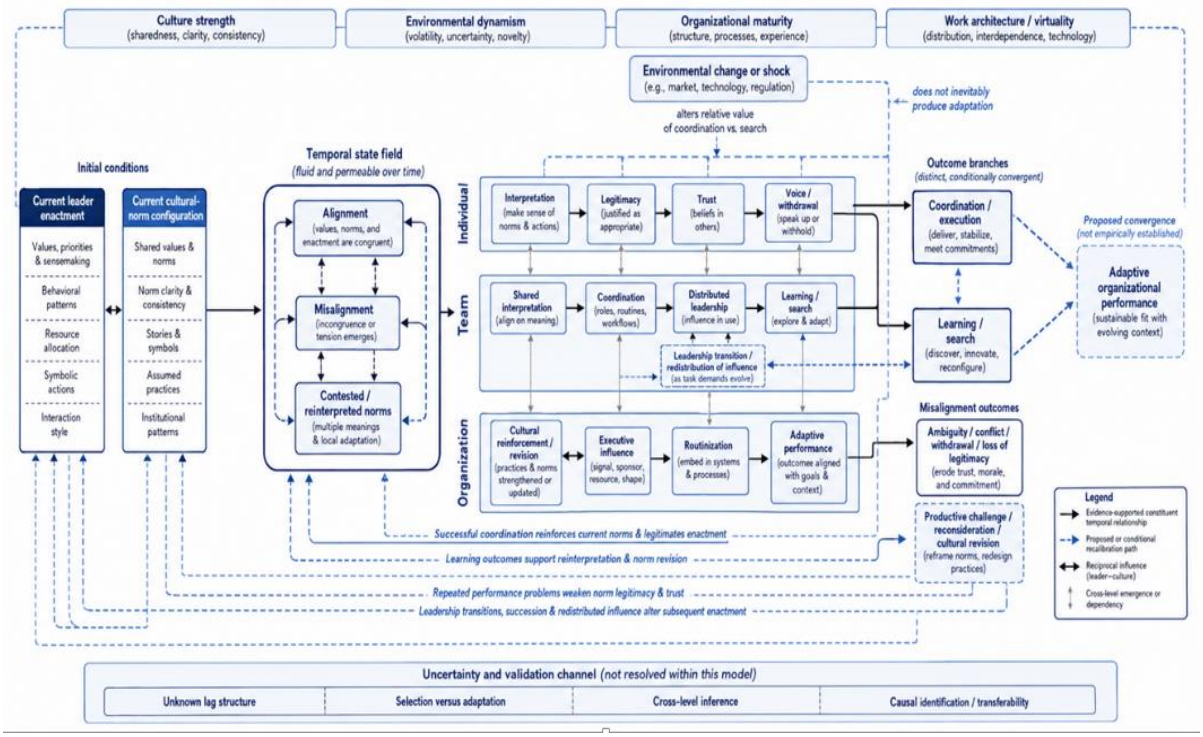

Figure 2. Temporal feedback recalibrates leader–culture alignment as organizational conditions change

Implications for leadership theory

The proposed model is intentionally not another leadership style. Leadership scholarship already faces substantial construct redundancy across nominally distinct leader behaviors [32]. Adding a "culture-aligned leadership" style would therefore reproduce the problem the model is meant to solve. Its contribution lies instead in changing the theoretical question: effectiveness should be attributed neither to behavior alone nor to culture alone, but to the conditional relationship among behavior, salient norms, analytical level, and adaptive demand.

This reframing has three implications. First, contextual variables should enter leadership theory as mechanisms and moderators rather than residual background. Second, effectiveness should be outcome-specific. Alignment that supports reliable execution may simultaneously inhibit exploration, making effectiveness dependent on which organizational requirement is theoretically relevant. Third, cross-level claims require explicit emergence assumptions. Individual perceptions of a leader, team-level shared norms, and organizational culture cannot substitute for one another simply because they are correlated.

The model therefore favors parsimonious behavioral specification over new style labels and treats leader–culture alignment as a relational condition. Its propositions complement rather than replace existing leadership theories: specific theories may explain the behavior, identity, motivation, influence, or learning processes contained within particular paths.

Implications for leadership development and organizational practice

Leadership development derived from this model would emphasize diagnostic capability and behavioral repertoire rather than mastery of one supposedly superior style. Empowering behavior, for example, has documented mechanisms and contingencies rather than uniform effects [23]. Development should therefore help leaders recognize which norms are operating, which adaptive demand is salient, and whether reinforcing, reinterpreting, or challenging those norms is defensible.

Organizational diagnosis likewise requires construct separation. Culture should not be inferred automatically from climate or employee sentiment [7]. Work architecture also matters because virtuality changes communication and coordination conditions that can alter how leadership behavior is interpreted [29]. A practical assessment would therefore require multiple sources and levels rather than a single leader–culture fit score.

Cultural change should also be treated as distributed and longitudinal. Executive leaders can contribute to corporate cultural change [18], but temporal fit research shows that compatibility itself changes as persons and environments evolve [31]. The implication is not that organizations should continuously manipulate culture. It is that leadership development and succession decisions should incorporate periodic reassessment of whether prevailing norms still support required forms of coordination and adaptation. These recommendations remain theoretical implications, not validated interventions or guarantees of organizational performance.

Future research agenda

Testing the model requires matching research design to the level and causal status of each proposition. Experimental designs can strengthen causal identification for bounded leadership behaviors and mechanisms, but their internal-validity advantages must be balanced against external validity and the difficulty of reproducing organizational cultural systems [33]. Field experiments or credible quasi-experiments could test selected behavior–interpretation paths, whereas longitudinal multilevel designs are better suited to cultural emergence, misfit trajectories, and recalibration.

Measurement is equally important. Future studies should distinguish value congruence from perceptual congruence rather than collapse them into one fit construct [8]. Culture and climate should also demonstrate discriminant validity before either is used to explain cross-level processes [7]. Repeated measurement is necessary to determine whether changing alignment reflects leader adaptation, employee socialization, selection, exit, or genuine cultural change.

The central adaptation hypothesis requires designs capable of observing both coordination and search, because a positive association with one cannot establish overall adaptive effectiveness. Comparative studies across stable and dynamic environments could test whether the value of alignment changes with adaptive demand. Stronger causal identification, explicit temporal modeling, and design triangulation are therefore jointly necessary to challenge the proposed architecture rather than merely confirm isolated associations [2, 31, 33].

Limitations of the proposed model

The model is limited first by the breadth of what it integrates. Leadership context, organizational culture, climate, person–environment fit, top-management processes, shared leadership, and organizational adaptation come from literatures with different constructs, measures, analytical levels, and causal traditions. Context itself requires precise theoretical specification [1], and culture should not be collapsed into climate simply to make cross-level measurement convenient [7]. The architecture is therefore an integrative proposal, not evidence that these domains constitute one empirically validated system.

Second, the evidence supporting its components is uneven. Leadership research can be vulnerable to causal ambiguity created by measurement and design choices [2]. Fit research likewise contains multiple definitions and operationalizations [16]. Consequently, the model should not be interpreted as demonstrating that alignment causes adaptive performance, that

misalignment causes cultural change, or that any leadership behavior has a universal effect. Selection, socialization, succession, formal structure, incentives, strategy, institutional context, technology, and workforce turnover can produce patterns that resemble the proposed mechanisms.

Third, the temporal architecture is underspecified empirically. Theory on leadership transitions describes dynamic adjustment but does not establish a universal organizational transition sequence [27]. Temporal fit research documents change while also identifying substantial design challenges [31]. Appropriate validation will therefore require designs capable of distinguishing causal change from correlated movement [33]. The model intentionally provides no optimal alignment threshold, culture-strength cutoff, maturity stage, or recalibration interval. Such quantities would require direct evidence.

Finally, transferability is uncertain. Relationships may differ across occupations, industries, national institutions, organization sizes, ownership forms, virtuality, and degrees of environmental turbulence. These boundaries are not residual inconveniences; they are part of the theory to be tested.

Conclusion

Leadership works through culture when leader behavior becomes interpretable and consequential within a system of norms that is itself appropriate to the organization's adaptive demands. The proposed multilevel contingency model replaces a simple style-to-performance assumption with a relational architecture linking enacted behavior, cultural norms, alignment and misalignment, cross-level mechanisms, and adaptation. Its central implication is deliberately conditional: alignment can facilitate legitimacy and coordination, yet the same convergence may constrain learning or search when existing norms require revision.

Culture is therefore neither a passive background nor an instrument leaders can freely engineer. Leader behavior and cultural context may influence one another across time, while team processes, environmental dynamism, organizational maturity, and work architecture alter the consequences of that relationship. The model offers propositions and disconfirmation conditions rather than claims of established causal effectiveness. Its value ultimately depends on whether future multilevel, longitudinal, comparative, and causally stronger research can refine, delimit, or reject the proposed relationships.

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